

SOME CHRISTIAN PROBLEMS IN THE FAR EAST

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THE last ten or eleven years since the end of the war with Japan have shown some fascinating problems for the Catholics and other Christians in the Far East. I cannot claim to be an authority on them, but I have watched them as best I can and would just like to tell here something of what I have seen and to hope that others may answer my doubts with far greater knowledge and experience.

To begin with, I went back to Japan ten years ago in 1947 and saw the air of expectation in the Catholic world, which I now feel seems to have been unjustified.

At that time, General MacArthur and the U.S.A. held complete control. The Japanese had been ordered to cease to believe in their religion (if you can call it a religion), Shinto. To this day, Catholics have been unable to decide whether Shinto was really a religion or a sort of political cult. If the latter, then Catholics could still practise it; if the former, then obviously not. At any rate, Shinto was now dead and every Catholic missionary wondered if Catholicism could not take its place; and the Protestants of course thought the same.

The Protestants, however, had more of a handicap, since most Protestant missionaries were either American or British and, as such, had been expelled or interned as enemies during the war. Not so with the Catholics, since both the Italian and German missionaries had been allies and were at work all through the war. The Catholics, however, had a big rival in Buddhism and Buddhism of many varieties. I remember a prominent Buddhist monk telling me 'the young of Japan are looking for the sort of God that appeals to them. Alas, it is not an elderly fat Buddha sitting contemplating his stomach—rather is it the young Christian God who was strong and able to suffer martyrdom and loved simplicity.' Yes, Catholicism had a great chance.

It was even believed that some of the Imperial Family might join the Church and that there would have been mass conversions. But nothing has happened—at least, worth talking of—and

perhaps the main reason has been that there have not been enough missionaries who spoke Japanese. I remember well General MacArthur almost begging me to get some Japanese-speaking priests or, as he put it, even lay teachers—but they did not exist.

He pointed out that his own Government would not allow any particular religion to be taught in the Japanese schools and as Shinto was banned, the children were growing up without religion. The Minister of Education was then himself a Catholic. He told me how both he and the Emperor also were deeply disturbed at this lack of religious background for the children.

He asked me to get any biographies or autobiographies I could of good-living people and send them to Japan. At least that would teach the children about clean religious living. Those days are now over; the American have gone, Japan is on her own, Shinto back and where are the Catholics? Did they capture the children of those ten years? No, alas, only very few.

The majority, the millions, have grown up without religion at all and have, as a result, mostly turned to Communism. Surely we have lost there a great opportunity and some missionaries have suggested it was because Christianity has become too westernized; the simplicity of the early days would have appealed more to the Eastern, the Japanese mind.

But is that so? Ten years after, I have been East again and this time to Formosa, which was Japanese when last I visited it. Here, there is no disillusionment and Catholicism is flourishing as never before in its conversion and enthusiasm. What a contrast from post-war Japan!

Is one answer, perhaps, that Formosa under Japan was never encouraged to be interested in Christianity, largely—they say—because the island was treated as a mission field under the Spanish Dominicans from Fukien in China?

Japan did not want a Chinese influence, nor a Spanish influence and so, by the time of the Japanese evacuation in 1945, there were only 4,000 Catholics in Formosa, an island with a population of 6½ million (now increased to 10½ million) and in the capital, Taipei, there was only one Catholic church.

Up to 1949, there was no particularly noticeable increase. Then came the flight of the Nationalists from the mainland and the Government of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was set up in Taipei. Since then, the Catholic population has increased

fantastically until it is today about 120,000. All that, in about seven or eight years. It is true that whole tribes of the aborigines have come in, led by the chieftains, but equally true that, once some of these chieftains decided to cease to be Catholics, their whole tribe has equally dropped the Church; but these tribes are not included in our figures of converts. To what, then, is it due?

The Nuncio, who is practical and no wishful thinker, remembers that our non-Chinese missionaries got away from China and are in Formosa, but that many of the Protestants have been allowed to remain in Red China or came back to the U.S.A. or Britain. We have got a good start, he feels, but soon there will be many more Protestant missionaries following us. That may well be, yet it does not answer altogether why so many people have become Christians—be they Catholics or Protestants—and so far remarkably few have become Protestants.

There are two theories for this considerable conversion figure. The first is that so many of the three million refugees from Red China have gone through so much suffering and misery since they have lost wealth, homes and relatives, that they have become, so to speak, purged and in a sense religious-minded. They had never met Christians on the mainland, or they had never had the time to study any religion. Today, they are rather lost and have a great deal of time on their hands.

They have a Confucian background and the Catholic religion appeals to them. This probably particularly applies to those who lived in many of the parts of China where Christianity had never penetrated, and especially to the military or Governmental castes.

I remember well in 1935 visiting a French Catholic monastery in the far interior of the Chinese mainland, near the borders of Szechuan and Yunan. The Prior told me that a few years before, the English Catholic, General George Pereira, a former Military Attaché in Peking, had passed through. The Prior invited the local Military Governor and other high officials to meet him. At grace before the dinner and after it, the military leaders were immensely impressed to see the General make the sign of the Cross.

From then on, realizing that Christianity was practised by Generals in European countries, they were much more polite and helpful to the missionaries.

This time, at a dinner with the Chinese Archbishop of Taipei,

I met a prominent Chinese General from Peking whose wife is a grand-daughter of the former Emperor of China. Furthermore, the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek is himself a Christian and feels that the Catholic Church is far more active in its anti-Communist attitude than are his fellow Methodists and other Protestants.

All this may well combine to make a conversion 'fashionable', but it is, I am told by the only Irish priest in Formosa, none the less genuine and sincere.

There is, it is believed, yet another reason for these conversions. In China, the family has always been the basis of social life and at the head of the family, in a position of particular importance, has been the matriarch grandmother, or great-grandmother, as you will. To her, in her old age, the most important thing has been the certainty that, when she died, she would get a proper pagan burial. No Chinese who studied or heard of Christianity ever felt quite satisfied that Christian converted descendants would really put their hearts into a good pagan funeral and burial and therefore the old mother always used her very real influence to see that her descendants did not become Christians.

But when the evacuation to Formosa took place in 1949 and 1950, the elderly had to be left behind and there is now no old grandmother in Formosa to stop conversions. This may well be a more serious reason than many would believe and it probably applies to the Chinese who are refugees—but it cannot wholly apply to the native Formosan. For the latter, the conversion has come more slowly and only in large numbers during the last two years.

It may well be the influence of what is happening to the refugees, but it is also, possibly, the increased number of priests on the island and the visible reminder of Catholicism in the colossal building of new churches.

In Taipei alone, there was only one Catholic church in 1947; today there are over 200. They are not large, of course, but they are all over the town. As I went south, I saw again a large number of new churches, all Catholic, in process of being built.

To Formosa, then, seems to have come the rush of conversions which had been expected in Japan after the war and which did not materialize; and this brings to the fore one or two problems.

For instance, the problem already referred to about Japan; the need for priests who speak the language. There are now four hundred priests in Formosa, where before there were less than a hundred. But even that is not enough. These priests are mostly also refugees from the mainland and they are scattered all over Formosa, in areas allocated to each mission field in former China. The reason for this is to have a skeleton force prepared to go back to the same area where each Order worked before. When the day comes, will these priests be able to return to the mainland and leave a flock which is mainly Formosan behind?

Even these priests only usually speak Mandarin and do not know the Formosan Fukien dialect. They are, however, learning fast and in proportion as they succeed, so do the conversions come in. I could not, however, but ask myself—after having visited Bolivia and the interior of Brazil last year—why were those Maryknoll fathers and other former Chinese missionaries being settled in South America when they are already needed in Formosa or may be shortly in China proper? Once more, I suppose, the answer is that there just are not enough vocations to go the whole world round as missionaries at just a time of change and revolution when they are more needed than ever.

There is a second problem which we must also face and one posed to me by the present and first Archbishop of Taipei—himself a Chinese.

Why, he asked me, do Catholics in Great Britain try to find excuses for Red China, forget about the awful tortures inflicted there on Catholics and especially on those Catholic priests who were themselves Chinese and for whom there seems no chance of escape from their present prison, short of apostasy or death?

When we see how Catholicism is forbidden in Red China and how it is allowed to flourish in Nationalist China, why do the Catholics of Great Britain not join with the Catholics of the United States and elsewhere to help the Nationalists?

It was pointed out to me that not one Catholic country in Europe or America recognizes Red China. Yet, when England did so in 1950, no protest was raised from Catholic quarters. Here, indeed, is a question for us to answer—how can we, with a clear conscience, not support Nationalist China when we know that there is no hope of freedom for Catholicism in Red China, whereas there is the utmost freedom and signs of tremendous

conversions under the Nationalists which would be continued, should they return to the mainland?

Formosa remains not only the bright jewel of Catholicism in the Chinese world, but also the centre to which look the Catholic Chinese of Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong and South-East Asia. There is already talk of a Catholic University being built in Formosa and it is, I believe, certain that, whatever happens in the end, invasion of the mainland or neutralization of the island, Catholicism will continue to flourish just in as much as priests speaking the language can be obtained.

Nearby Hong Kong would like to do her best to help, but here, too, has come a tremendous influx of Chinese and resultant conversions. In this small island of two million people, there are nearly as many Catholics already as there are among the ten million Formosans—well over 80,000. The Catholic Schools (not allowed in Formosa, where all go to State schools) are hard put to it and there are relays of students, morning, afternoon and evening in the hope of teaching the lot.

Here, Christians compete with Red Chinese—whereas in Formosa there are no Communists. Only two hours away by air, are the Philippines, a country with eighteen million Catholics out of twenty-two millions; but unfortunately, there is no love lost between Chinese and Filipinos so that little help can come from there.

If asked what then can we do at home, I could only say, pray for more vocations, especially amongst the Chinese and Japanese themselves, and do as little as possible to make the East believe we Western Christians are tolerant of the persecuting Red Chinese and Russians.